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Crossing the divide: school-based youth work

Tony Jeffs

School-based youth work, like all youth work, is founded upon the inalienable right of young people to refuse to engage with a worker. Consequently workers must first make contact, either by attracting young people to clubs or centres, or by going to where they gather. For two centuries workers have mixed building-based work with detached work. However the balance between them constantly changes (Jeffs and Smith, 2002). Recently it has become more difficult to attract young people to clubs and centres. First because sophisticated home entertainment packages and computer games plus compulsory homework (currently 2 hours per day for 15-year-olds) have led to teenagers spending more time 'indoors'. Second, smaller families plus greater affluence mean most now have their own centrally heated room. Clubs therefore are no longer special places to meet friends, escape parents or dispel boredom. Furthermore dormitory and suburban living means many must travel further to clubs that due to under-investment are often unkempt and poorly equipped. Whereas commercial clubs can consistently attract large numbers to under-18 sessions, few youth projects can achieve this. Without investment in specialist buildings most workers will be obliged increasingly to employ detached methods to reach young people.

Essentially detached work means going to where young people gather, therefore it takes place in locales as diverse as schools, streets or Young Offender Institutions. Venue and locality are irrelevant, what counts are that those characteristics that make youth work a discrete activity remain constant. In summary these are:

- the relationship between worker and young person is voluntary allowing the latter to terminate it at will
- the focus is on the young person's needs, not those of the host institution or agency
- education, rather than indoctrination, control or behaviour modification, resides at the heart of the process (Jeffs and Smith, 2007).

Long tradition

Youth work has always used school premises and been obliged to co-exist with curriculum-led, classroom-based teaching. Much pioneering youth work was school-based. For example the Ragged Schools opened from the 1830s onwards in the poorest localities, provided an enormous range of welfare and community programmes including youth clubs, play-schemes and camps (Montague, 1904). Schools were home to many early uniformed groups invariably established by a schoolteacher who voluntarily organised after-school clubs and activities because they viewed the curriculum as too narrow to equip anyone for a life worth living and to encourage ex-pupils to continue their 'education'. However the term 'school-based youth work' signifies something different, namely the integration of youth work within the life of the school, a *mélange* of the formal curriculum that is the focus of school life with the informal education residing at the heart of youth work. School-based work differs from what is often called 'dual-use', where schooling and youth work are discrete since it involves both working together. For apart from sharing buildings, time and staff, it aims to fuse both in order to deepen and extend the educational experience offered to young people attending the school or living locally.

Community schools and youth work

Post-1900 progressive educators began looking beyond using school buildings as the base for delivering youth work, adult education and play work. Taking their lead from John Dewey and Robert Owen they advocated the development of schools as community centres arguing they were the only institutions within a society divided by fissures of class, race and religion, capable of crafting viable communities. Community schools, they argued, must become places where municipalities provided education from cradle to grave and a portfolio of other services. They would be hubs at the heart of every community, built around a shared responsibility for the raising of our children, incorporating theatres, sports halls and gymnasiums, libraries, attractive community rooms

equipped to host meetings, classes and social events, medical surgeries and clinics and the local sub-offices of welfare agencies. In Britain the first purpose-built community school was opened in 1929. Subsequently many variants emerged, made possible by the freedom and control local authorities enjoyed over both schooling and welfare services.

Whatever the model, the status of youth work within community schools was unresolved. Some held schools were unsuitable venues as most teachers were too authoritarian to make effective youth workers (Brew, 1943) and school buildings a poor substitute for well-designed youth centres (Edwards-Rees, 1944). However among advocates of community schooling two perspectives emerged. One maintained young people should be viewed as equally valued members of the community and that discrete youth provision discouraged this. Therefore they should be encouraged to use the community facilities, such as lounges, gymnasiums and canteens. In some cases integration entailed restructuring the timetable with all ages joining classes (scheduled across a day between 09.00 to 21.00 hours). The other maintained young people needed their own 'youth wings' within which noisy activities that might 'disturb' and 'disrupt' other users could be located. Many were opened but unlike traditional clubs these rarely duplicated the normal range of facilities (for example, workshops or gymnasiums) provided within the community school. Whereas some were physically integrated others stood apart on the edge of a playground or playing field, even off campus. Generally wings were managed by headteachers who frequently imposed rules on the youth tutors employed to run them, such as that suspended or absent pupils were to be excluded. Aside from such inconveniences most tutors ran the wings like other clubs.

Early advocates of community schools and school-based youth work, such as Teddy O'Neill, Henry Morris and Stewart Mason believed success required special teachers dedicated to public service, comfortable with adults and young people, scholarly and with sufficient cultural depth to guarantee they had something worthwhile to teach. They were convinced most teachers lacked such attributes and accordingly applied harsh selection criteria which led to the appointment of a high proportion of 'unqualified' graduates, supported by volunteers and part-timers, who would provide the core workforce for youth work, community development and adult education. However bridging the gap between the formal and informal has always been problematic. For example, the difficulties compulsory schooling has in managing some pupil behaviour means teachers rely for survival on punishments and distancing themselves from students. Despite these tensions schoolteachers often enjoy getting to know pupils in different contexts and educating informally beyond the classroom.

Evidence suggests this model can succeed; certainly many were remarkably successful. For instance in the 1940s over 70 per cent of ex-pupils attended clubs

and classes at Impington Village College, a figure matched by Prestolee School where Teddy O'Neill was head until 1951. However this usually hinged on the presence of charismatic teachers such as Stewart Wilson at Sutton Centre (Fletcher et al., 1985), or R. F. MacKenzie at Summerhill (Murphy, 1998), or on extraordinary administrators like Stuart Mason or Henry Morris (Jeffs, 1998), committed to investing the resources essential to ensuring the schools were aesthetically attractive, well-equipped and appropriately staffed.

Changes afoot

Post-1970 changes in social structure and policy have radically restructured school-based youth work. First, encouraging young people to remain in education faded as a priority when the school-leaving age was raised to 16 and wholesale youth unemployment left few alternatives to remaining in education (Mizen, 2004). Currently 80 per cent are in some form of education until 18. Consequently educational institutions are now the prime location wherein youth workers can contact young people. Furthermore compulsory attendance means schools are the focus for government-led initiatives seeking to modify young people's behaviour. Be it concerns about political alienation, obesity, sexual promiscuity, low financial savvy or whatever these are now predominately addressed by inserting components into the national curriculum rather than via informal educational initiatives delivered by youth workers.

Second, the quasi 'market' in education introduced post-1988 views students as customers obliged to shop for the best (or cheapest) school, college or course. Therefore persuading individuals to remain in education is a priority only for unattractive institutions. High status ones can cherry-pick and discipline by threatening expulsion, consequently extra-curricular activities and support services for them become far less important. Less prestigious institutions must focus on motivating, managing and retaining students. This persuades some to employ youth workers, partly to manage reluctant attendees. These like detached street workers patrol and loiter in 'hot spots' (Reeves et al., 1993; Hand and Wright, 1997), work with troublesome and disengaged students within classrooms addressing 'issues' such as anger management and take them off-site for activity and 'training' programmes. Such interventions are not primarily youth work but examples of youth work skills being colonised to manage students who challenge the good order of the institution.

Third, growth in certification and testing means English pupils are possibly the most examined in the world – averaging 75 exams during a school career (PAT, 2002; Jeffs, 2002) – and this has transformed relationships between teacher and student. Likewise the reintroduction of the Victorian 'payment by

result' system linking teacher earnings to exam performance encourages the setting aside of students' broader intellectual and social needs, mounting marginalisation of non-tested subjects and jettisoning of extra-curricular activities (Boyle and Bragg, 2006). Overall school teacher involvement in youth work and extra-curricula activities, such as running sports teams and clubs, has fallen catastrophically. Well-funded institutions employ specialist 'coaches' to deliver sporting and cultural activities and some parents pay commercial providers. Unfortunately this leaves too many with no access to the array of social, cultural and sporting activities previously offered within the curriculum or voluntarily by teachers.

Finally although community schools retain a presence elsewhere in England the determination of governments post-1988 to impose a free market model of education on LEAs has led to their virtual demise. Erosion of catchment areas, delegation of funding to schools with cash following the pupil, creation of specialist and faith schools and academies, removal of adult education and FE from LEA management, and erosion of local democratic control of schools collectively encourage parents to view themselves as consumers and schools to act as competing businesses. These changes fracture time honoured linkages between schools and their 'neighbourhood'. As fewer attend neighbourhood schools but commute to one matching their parent's faith, career aspirations or social and class affectations (Robertson, 2000), the concept of the community school dissolves. By way of compensation schools seek to construct an 'imagined' community comprising staff and students (Shirdcliffe et al., 2006) but such is the brevity of the attachment that few invest more than the tokenistic minimum. This is the 'community' within which contemporary school-based youth work operates.

Given that schools can opt out of LEA control and frequently cater for a minority of those living nearby it would be absurd for statutory youth services to invest in campus-based buildings or staff. Consequently even LEAs who once pioneered this approach have abandoned it. Increasingly schools and colleges have opted to hire youth workers from the statutory or voluntary sectors or employ their own. Also many schools invest in counselling, stress management programmes and various therapies of often dubious worth (Furedi, 2004) delivered by youth organisations (Hodgson and Jeffs, 2007). Where schools and colleges do employ youth workers this is not a superficial change of paymaster, for institutions want a mode of youth work that concentrates exclusively on the 'school community'. Evermore educational institutions build security fences, employ guards and install electronic surveillance equipment to keep the community and young people who are either non- or ex-students at bay (Whittaker, 2006). Within approximately a decade the fortress school has replaced the open-access community school. Even during lunchtime, as one minister explained, he now expected schools to ensure pupils:

are in school all day, no exceptions, end of story ... Students stay on the school premises, and the school provides an enriching lunchtime programme of mentoring by local business people, reading groups for support with literacy, sporting activities supervised by youth workers, as well as a wide range of language classes. ... Good for pupils. Good for the school. Good for the reputation of education in the local community. (Smithers, 2004: 6)

Within this closed environment youth work becomes viewed simply as a mechanism for eradicating problems identified by school or college managers. Rarely is it possible for young people to set the agenda, for the work takes place in an environment where they are powerless to shape the curriculum, rules or ethos and with no rights to absent themselves if under 16. Those managing the school or college may understand what youth work is and the educational role it can play if workers are gifted sufficient sovereignty to build relationships with staff and students. If so the aspiration of *Transforming Youth Work* that 'the goals for informal education through youth work complement those of more formal routes such as schools and colleges' (DfES, 2002: 11) may acquire substance. But elsewhere things are different with workers obligated to maintain order in the public areas and keep out drugs and the bothersome, provide lunchtime and after-school activities, and undertake group work with those identified as challenging. In one school the worker is on standby to go when 'buzzed' to classrooms whenever a student 'kicks off'. Elsewhere they are employed to take out of school, whenever money allows, those defined as troublesome. In another school the worker was told not to 'waste time' on academic high achievers but concentrate on the 'chavs' and disaffected. What these schools wanted was faux youth work skills to help control the difficult students classroom teachers felt ill-equipped to manage (Jeffs and Stanton, forthcoming).

Extended schools

The 'Extended Schools Initiative' hints at renewed government interest in the community school concept. It promises parents access all year round from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. by 2010 to:

- high quality childcare either on site or through local providers
- a varied menu of activities such as homework clubs, study support, sport, music tuition, dance and drama, arts and crafts, special interest clubs
- parenting support, including family learning sessions
- wider community access to ICT, sports and arts facilities, including adult learning (DfES, 2006).

Partially based on experimental 'full-service schools' operating in the USA these only superficially resemble community schools, being time and age restricted. Rather, these are integrated school and child welfare centres offering parents, not the community, one-stop health and welfare provision for children. Services are directed towards raising school achievement and lowering dependency on state benefits by getting more mothers into full- or part-time employment within the low wage female labour market (Hutton, 2006). It is assumed a reduction in welfare costs will offset the childcare bill. The rights and wrongs of locking young people in school for 50 hours per week is an issue not yet satisfactorily aired; certainly the National Youth Agency (NYA, 2006) briefing on youth service involvement in extended schools did not raise it.

Evaluation of 'full service extended schools' first year pilots suggests they can work in more effective and sensitive ways with pupils and families (Cummings et al., 2006). Children benefit from 'wrap-around' care offering a safe pre- and after-school environment plus ready access to on-site welfare professionals. However what post-primary extended schools will resemble is unclear especially when the leaving age moves to 18. A possible pointer to the pattern of provision can be gleaned from the welcome ministers gave the policy advocated by the Institute of Policy Research (Lloyd, 2007) for:

Young people aged 11 to 14 to participate in long-term extra curricular activity, one day a week after school, choosing from options in the Youth Matters Green Paper. This would be mandated through an extension of the school day, creating a legal requirement for parents to ensure participation. (Margo et al., 2006: xii)

Another comes from how this policy developed in the USA where agencies such as the Boys' and Girls' Clubs of America provide after-school packages located in neighbourhood centres or on site. These comprise a mix of quiet rooms and support for homework, activities, social facilities and learning packages addressing topics such as raising self-esteem, gender relationships and conflict resolution. Research showed users preferred non-school-based provision and minimal teacher involvement. Evaluators also found packaged learning materials were far less effective than informal education delivered by youth workers (Hirsch, 2005). Feinstein et al. (2006: 324) may be correct in arguing youth work can 'provide precisely the form of complementary provision to formal education that is needed'. However as Hirsch shows venue and staffing are important with schools often the least congenial place to deliver these programmes.

Working the school and college

School-based work has unique features that practitioners must take account of. These are that:

- the young people will have little control over the building
- it must function according to 'timetables' constructed to meet the needs of the formal programme
- youth work will be perceived as marginal to the focus of an organisation driven by examination results, externally measured 'academic' outcomes and the need to maximise numbers and income
- youth workers will generally be perceived as occupying a subordinate position in the hierarchy to managers and teachers or lecturers. Status and rank are distributed on the basis of office, salary, subject taught and perceived ability to control students – according to most of these measures youth workers score low (Jeffs and Stanton, forthcoming).

Besides classroom 'teaching' school-based workers carve out space to undertake youth work by exploiting gaps between lessons and public spaces. Workers allot set times to visit specific parts of the campus to 'work' the corridors and canteens. In this respect they operate like detached workers, recognising the crucial importance of 'being available' by 'being around' (see Hazler, 1998; Crimmens et al., 2004). This approach enables students to recognise workers as familiar figures and importantly allows them over time to make contact, strike up conversation, 'informally' raise issues, ask for advice or seek support. Students learn where and when they can 'bump into' the worker. These perambulations help the worker to get to know students and staff, spot isolated and rejected students and read the changing moods of the institution; to sense, for example, when tensions between groups may be developing. Often the smile from the worker may be the only one a nervous student received that day, the brief conversation in the canteen, the solitary personal exchange enjoyed all morning and the fleeting words of greeting the sole recognition of shared humanity. Working in corridors, playgrounds and canteens demands considerable skill – listening, observing, understanding, modelling behaviour, giving brief advice, offering help when required. Like detached workers or the club worker trawling their patch they must exercise care and sensitivity while retaining a faith that the innumerable brief encounters amount to more than a chimera. Certainly it is impossible to quantify the worth of the 'casual' exchanges or compute the intangible benefits emanating from the offer of friendship and possibility of help when and if needed.

Nevertheless these 'low-impact contacts', as Hazler (1998) terms them, provide the basis upon which it becomes possible to build, when necessary, deeply valued supportive relationships and perhaps more importantly, the brief contact, the hurried word may negate the subsequent need for counselling and support. Time spent out and about is critical but the worker also needs an accessible base – somewhere students can find them and where the worker can speak quietly with individuals or groups. Also they must have the resources and space to undertake group work for they are youth workers not counsellors. Consequently their focus will inevitably be on developing groups rather than addressing individual need (Luxmoore, 2000).

Finally school-based workers must be prepared to collaborate with other staff, especially classroom teachers, some of whom may be anxious about particular students and, consciously or unconsciously, perceive the worker as someone who may be helpful. At times some will be encountering problems of control and, given the ways managers judge them, may view the worker as someone with whom they can share concerns without eroding their standing or reputation. Many school teachers are unhappy with their working environment, up to a third would leave if they could find something offering equivalent pay (Smithers and Robinson, 2000). School-based workers must be aware of this. Much as detached workers seek to diffuse tensions between community wardens or the police and young people, so they must be prepared to build bridges between young people and other staff by encouraging teachers and students to co-operate and understand more and criticise less. Equally, and this may be far more difficult and professionally dangerous, they must be prepared, like all youth workers, to advocate on behalf of young people. Club or detached workers operating independently of schools or social services have greater leeway to act as advocates. Sadly schools and colleges occasionally treat students unfairly, even illegally, and when that happens the duty of the youth worker to support the victim is severely tested. In an ideal world the professional integrity and autonomy of workers in such circumstances would be safeguarded like those of chaplains working within a prison (LSC, 2006). However it is not, therefore school-based workers must appreciate they walk a tightrope and without warning may be embroiled in conflicts with management or classroom colleagues.

Conclusion

Everything points towards escalating growth in the number of school-based workers. Besides the extended schools agenda we have the remodelling of the school workforce directed by the DfES School Workforce Unit. Driven by

continuing difficulties in recruiting teachers it seeks to transfer non-teaching work within schools to a growing army of quasi-professionals and assistants (Thompson, 2006). Currently there are 102,000 teaching assistants, plus a growing army of learning mentors (Crudadas, 2005) and youth workers in schools, numbers that will expand with the push towards 'personalised education' (DfES, 2006a). This envisages teachers becoming co-ordinators of learning and creators of learning units aided by an array of professionals and helpers managing the students and institution. Clearly youth workers, or youth development workers as they may become known, will figure among these.

Invited or not youth workers must actively strive to work in schools and colleges. Some FE colleges have 40,000 students, half under 20, and nationally around 250,000 under-16s attend colleges (Whittaker, 2006). With growing amalgamations some secondary schools have approaching 1,500 pupils. Given the difficulties youth workers encounter reaching so many young people they have no alternative but to find an entrée into these institutions. The composition of their student bodies also allows workers to connect with groups that neither detached nor centre-based provision currently does, however the educational focus of the institution requires school- or college-based workers to possess sufficient educational 'standing' to enjoy the respect of both students and staff. Maturity, educational experience and an enthusiasm for learning are essential prerequisites for any informal educator hoping to succeed in this setting. An absence of these will diminish their impact and make it impossible for them to engage in meaningful dialogue with those staff and students who value education as a self-evident good.

The history of youth work engagement with formal educational institutions is not a happy one (Jeffs and Smith, 1991). Youth work organisations and practitioners who wish to find a 'way into schools and colleges' must, like those who went before, tread carefully. Yet finding a way in is crucial if youth work is to avoid operating only at the margins with a tiny proportion of the potential client group. However workers must remember they have no control over funding, buildings or curriculum, that for now they are at best guests and at worst tolerated intruders.

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